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ABSTRACT

An analysis of the social and political context of English teaching in Australia is presented in this paper. The paper emphasizes that the leading theorists from England such as James Britton, Harold Rosen, Nancy Martin, and Douglas Barnes, are providing theories that either ignore or misinterpret the social reality in which teachers and pupils operate. It suggests that the reality of education within a capitalist society is not always a world controlled by decent well-meaning people who want only the best for the children in the school, but one that has as its aim the perpetuation of the capitalist mode of production with its attendant class system and unequal distribution of wealth, knowledge, and power. A discussion of recent works by Australian educational theorists points out their failure to analyze the social context of English in Australian schools, such as the back to basics movement and the linguistic insecurity of upwardly mobile lower middle class teachers. The oppressive nature of school writing, which works to further delineate class by convincing the masses they cannot write, is especially noted and is contrasted to the socialistic Freinet method of writing in which pupils decide what is to be written and own their own writing. (MKM)

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THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT OF ENGLISH TEACHING IN AUSTRALIA - AN EXPLORATION

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The social and political context of English teaching in Australia - an exploration

This paper had its genesis back in the Armidale Conference on English in Teacher Education, September 1977. Margaret Gill[1] describes how there was a moment in a plenary session when discussion reached an impasse. Out of that impasse was born a working party which was to look at politics in education.

However, for the authors of this paper the most significant contributions took place before the working party was set up. Issues were raised such as censorship in Queensland and its relationship to the economic crisis, the function of education within capitalism, the nature of our society, the sacking of the Whitlam government, unemployment among the young and the impact of this on education.

All of these issues and others were taken to the working party and what followed was indeed in many ways a confused session. The task of making order of the working party was an extremely difficult one and it fell to Gill to perform it. However when one turns to her report published in 1977 one finds little of the political excitement or confusion of the pre-working party debate or of the session itself. Order has been established but we feel that it is an order which has drained off the original impulses that gave rise to the working party.

We wish to make it quite clear here that in no way are we accusing Gill of bias of any kind. What we are saying is that she made a selection of what she heard and that the very selective process is symptomatic of a much wider failure among English academics to come to grips with the political issues affecting the teaching of English. This paper is an attempt to move towards such a critique.

Let us begin then with a critical analysis of the currently hegemonic group - the liberal language in education theorists, Britton, Rosen, Martin and Barnes. It is important to say from the start that we completely acknowledge the value of the contribution made to teaching by the 'London School'. Nor do we in any way associate ourselves with such critiques as those of J. Williams[2] and D. Crystal[3].

Our problem with the work of Britton et alia is that it is based on either an incomplete analysis of society or an incorrect one. So the theory is unable to predict the conditions necessary for success nor act as a guide in the case of difficulties. In other words, despite all its obvious concern for the classroom, the theory is not geared for total action because it either ignores or misinterprets the social reality in which teachers and pupils operate.

What view of society emerges from the work of Britton et alia? Consider the following questions:

> We want children, as a result of our teaching, to understand; to be wise as well as well-informed, able to solve fresh problems rather than have learnt the answers to old ones; indeed, not only able to answer questions but also able to ask them. (Barnes)[4]

> Finally we want our pupils to perceive the world as a place which is orderly but infinitely responsive to new ways of saying and doings things. We can best help them to reach this by making our classrooms places of the same kind. (Britton)[5]

Who, we might ask, is the 'we' of these quotations. Certainly not Rona Joyner or Bjelke-Petersen, or the authors of the Black Papers, etc. The point here is that by using 'we' Britton and Barnes suggest that the world is controlled by decent well-meaning people who want only the best for the children in the school. The reality of education within our capitalist society is vastly different however.[6] Life in Queensland in the last three years has at least proved the non-existence of the mythical 'we'.

Even when they are considering the grim reality of schooling the 'London School' do so in language which serves more to obscure the problem. Thus C. & H. Rosen conclude a chapter on the "Context of the School Situation" with these remarks:

> Hargreaves (1967) was led to conclude that in secondary schools of the kind he investigated, the majority of pupils and staff regarded life in them as a necessary evil. Yet the incontrovertible fact stares us in the face that in our primary schools at this moment the freedom to create the kind of context indicated in this chapter is enormous. It would be naive to assert that subtle (and occasionally crude!) constraints do not exist, or that it is not within the bounds of possibility that greater constraints could be imposed. Nevertheless, there are schools which show how much scope there is for those who wish to establish a situation in which a new kind of relationship can flourish and real learning go forward. [7]

There is no attempt here to understand why freedom should be "enormous" at one conjuncture and less at another. And of course the passive voice of "could be

imposed" begs the questions "why?" and "by whom?"

Paralleling this ignorance of society we have a refusal to explore fully the findings of their research. Thus:

> What this means, though, is that the single most important use of writing in secondary schools appears to be as a means of testing and not as a means of learning - and that this emphasis becomes stronger as the child moves up the school.(Martin)[8]

For us the crucial question to ask here is why? Martin and her fellow authors chose not to pose the question. To do so would lead directly towards a specific consideration of the social and political function of writing within our education system. It is just such an analysis that we attempt in the second part of this paper.

When Britton & Co. do take a look at life outside the classroom they become infuriatingly vague. Thus Britton:

> Sociologists and linguists who have begun to study the forces that operate against the school and against co-operative learning show how intricate and powerful a network they may sometimes form and how elaborate and far-reaching any countermeasures will have to be.[9]

An interesting statement because of the increasing uncertainty and also because of the continuing failure to ask questions which might reveal the nature, origin and mode of operation of the 'forces'. There are times when vagueness about one's ideas may indeed be an appropriate tactic. Brecht's performance before the committee on Un-American Activities is a splendid example.[10] But when liberal educators raise vagueness to the level of a total strategy they run the very real risk that no-one will understand fully what they mean.

Of all the 'London School' Barnes is, we find, the most political. From Communication to Curriculum[10] consistently bumps up against social and political reality. And in his Armidale paper [11] Barnes explicitly raises the role of knowledge and power within society. But the obliqueness remains. Still many people who sat and heard Barnes do not understand the full revolutionary push behind the notion that children should interpret the world, not have it transmitted to them.

That vagueness is neither inevitable nor desirable can be seen from the following quotations, the first from Barnes:

> Australia and the U.K. are stratified societies: some groups have greater power, status and wealth than others do. Our education systems are deeply involved in allocating pupils to strata and in maintaining the strata in existence. [12]

We would ask - is Barnes talking of the class system here? We believe he is. Is he saying that the class system ensures that the majority of the population does not benefit fully from education? We believe again that he is. Is he then advocating the overthrow of the class system? We do not know.

By contrast Richard Ohmann in his book English in America[13] leaves us in no doubt where he stands. In a passage on examinations and I.Q. tests which he terms "rites of passage" on the "ladder of success" he has the following to say:

> We should understand what we are up against: not tests that are arbitrary, but a class society that requires such tests. No attack on these rites of passage can be finally successful unless it overturns bourgeois culture itself, and the rule of our dominant classes. [14]

It must be acknowledged here that Barnes is quite aware of the political limitations of his work[15] and that his work is "distorted" because it is too "classroom centred"[16] We agree with this of course and would go further and point out that the end result of liberal educators confining their criticism to only part of the system is that they do not suggest that the system needs changing and to that extent they actually help uphold the system.

The force of what we are saying is we believe brought out even more clearly if we examine the writings of Australian academics who have been influenced by the 'London School'.

Language and Education Language Development Phase 1 has as its aim the provision of a "conceptual framework for the teaching of English in Australian Schools".[17] Yet nowhere do we find even the beginnings of an attempt to analyse the social context of English in Australian schools. If Language and Education were buried in a time capsule to be dug up in a thousand years, the scholars of the future would be totally unable to reconstruct even those social factors that directly

affected the work of English teachers in the seventies and eighties.

All that we are offered by way of social comment are deepfelt concerns about standard English (P. 205)[18], a coy reference from Skilbeck to the controversy surrounding MACOS (presumably its banning in Queensland) (P. 256)[19], an equally oblique remark from Bernstein that teachers may have to be "slightly more political" (P. 302)[20] and pious hopes from Professor Halliday that language study will "lay bare the power structure that lies behind our everyday social relationships" (P. 285)[21]. One is reminded here of the Literature-breeds-sensitivity Vs. the Auschwitz-commandants-read-Goethe debates or even the fact that Joseph Stalin was interested in linguistics. The Language Development Project has of course come up with useful and pertinent information but as with Britton, Barnes et al. we find that the important questions are left unanswered. Thus, from J. Maling-Keepes et al we discover that:

> over and again teachers in discussing the level of competence of their children indicated quite clearly substantial negative attitudes towards that language.[22]

This is clearly vital information. How is it to be interpreted? We know for instance that teachers are upwardly mobile lower middle class[23] and that this is the class in society which is most linguistically insecure[24] and presumably intolerant. How do these facts affect the work of teachers? How do teachers fit into a class society? What role has been assigned to them by the dominant class? We would argue that these and other questions are of fundamental importance. Yet the Project Team ignored them - so much for the "conceptual framework".

Other writers in Australia are of course more politically aware but not, we would argue, significantly so. For example in his very entertaining paper "Secondary English - Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow"[25], Garth Boomer reviews the main influences on trends in English teaching in Australia. He concludes his account with a crystal ball gazing session about the future which works up into quite a 'I have a dream' climax where suddenly and quite astonishingly like unto the proverbial bolt we find that in Boomer's ideal world

> wherever possible, learning will be related to ACTION (original emphasis), quite often political in nature, in the real world, since the ultimate test of any learning is its usefulness and power to transform[26]

This occurs on p.15. Nothing in the previous 14 or even in the next 490 pages from other contributors gives any real indication of what is to be transformed, why it should be transformed or why classrooms are not 'real'. Nor does Boomer give any indication of what he means by 'political Action' (with a big 'A').

It is time (oops) to abandon the crystal balls and do some serious thinking about the nature of politics, power, knowledge and English teaching in Australia. That such a task is urgent can be seen from a glance at the Working Paper for this Commission.[27] The Guild of English teachers and academics is indeed worried. Right-wing onslaughts from the Back to Basics movement and groupings such as STOP (Society to Outlaw Pornography) and CARE (Campaign Against Regressive Education) have left us anxious. In the last four years in Queensland many an academic who has lectured on the importance of talking one's way to meaning has discovered anew the ancient value of silence.

In the face of this crisis the Working Paper shows only the most rudimentary grasp of the political realities that govern our society. This, for example, leads the author to posit a model of society which by implication equates the political force of parents and employers.[28]

Here we have the ultimate irony - the oblique vagueness of Britton, Barnes, Rosen and Martin has borne strange fruit. The pink flush from England has been bleached out to a hard Australian white.

What follows is an alternative view of the relationship between "school learners, the community and the teaching of English".

It is a view based on the presumption that English teaching is part of the process of schooling under capitalism and that this process has as its aim the perpetuation of the capitalist mode of production with its attendant class system and unequal distribution of wealth, knowledge and power.[29] An examination therefore of the

role of English teaching in the community, and of the social forces constraining English teaching, will need to take account, we believe, of the tensions between the ideals of liberal educators, among whom English teachers are frequently at the forefront, and the reality of capitalist schooling, characterised as it is by relations of subordination and domination that produce in both pupil and teacher (including the English teacher) the very hierarchical consciousness that helps to permit and condition the inequalities of capitalism. It is this tension that perhaps helps to explain why it is that, even within the community of English teachers there are "defectors" to the "back-to-the basics" movement or the 'Council for Educational Standards".[30]

For reasons of space and time we have chosen to concentrate on writing in the school to illustrate our analysis of the school-community relationship and the limitations of the liberal perspective.

Most liberal educators have taken as their starting point on writing the comments of Vygotsky.[31] This had led them in part to view writing from a psychological viewpoint where writing is abstracted away from its historical and social context[32] and as a result its functioning in society and particularly the school is either only partially understood or even misconceived.

As Dolores Palomo points out[33] it is one of the central tenets of liberal educators that learning to write is a good thing; that literacy liberates. So it comes as a shock to Palomo to encounter the idea running through contemporary French thought that "written language enables men to enslave their fellow human beings."[34] She quotes Levi-Strauss' example of the Indian Chief who pretended to be able to write to exploit the rest of the tribe to boost his own authority and prestige. Examples such as this have led Levi-Strauss to conclude that "the primary

function of writing, as a means of communication, is to facilitate the enslavement of other human beings"[35].

Palomo also quotes from Roland Barthes' analysis[36] of the Dominici murder trial where, according to Barthes, Dominici's rural language marked him out from the court and helped to convict him. Dominici was illiterate and thus for Barthes was shut out from the world of the official languages of law and literature. For Barthes the system of literature is an agency for improving and maintaining the dominant cultural values.

The criticisms of structuralists such as Barthes and Levi-Strauss have been echoed by some Marxist theorists. Somewhat like Barthes, H.M. Enzensberger[35] sees writing as a "highly formalised technique" which at school "forms an important part of authoritarian socialisation". Because it plays this role writing is

> "extraordinary beset with taboos. Spelling mistakes, which are completely immaterial in terms of communication, are punished by the social disqualification of the writer. The roles that govern this technique have a normative power attributed to them for which there is no rational basis. Intimidation through the written word has remained a widespread and class-specific phenomenon even in advanced industrial societies."[37]

For Enzensberger the methods used to transmit writing techniques serve to reinforce the "alienating factors" inherent in writing. In similar vein Nicos Poulantzas[38] considers that writing plays a vital role in the capitalist state. It is a role which enables the state to encode and make function its knowledge and power relationships while keeping the "popular masses" in ignorance.

The key elements in keeping the masses away from the world of writing and power are played by "Grammar and Orthography".[39] These, as noted by Enzensberger, are fetishised to the extent that the masses lack the

confidence to write. This, according to Poulantzas, leaves writing playing the role of "representing still more than the spoken word, the articulation and distribution of knowledge and power within the state."[39] Moveover Poulantzas points out:

> "In a certain sense, nothing exists for the capitalist State unless it is written down. In the pre-capitalist states, writing was simply a matter of transcribing the (real or supposed) utterances of the Sovereign: it was a writing of commemoration and revelation. By contrast, the anonymous writing of the capitalist State does not repeat a discourse, but plots a certain path, recording the bureaucratic sites and mechanisms and representing the hierarchically centralised space of the State."[40]

Palomo records that she was "disconcerted" by the views of Barthes and Levi-Struass. Enzensberger and Poulantzas as we have seen do not contradict either of the structuralists but enlarge on the role of writing specifically within capitalism. Their views only add to the shock. Writing is no longer the good socially neutral technique we had imagined it to be. Nor is the role of the teacher socially neutral. The emphasis on spelling and grammar serves not to improve students writing but rather to reduce the number of people who can use writing in their lives.

With these views in mind, let us now consider the specific case of school writing. What can we say are the main features of school writing that have to be explained? Firstly, it is far from popular. Secondly, there is very little continuous writing done in schools - what there is consists mostly of the essay type and is generally seen only by the teacher. Note-taking and filling in blanks continue to predominate within school writing. Finally, despite pleas from liberal educators to reduce competition in the classroom, most school writing is assessed[41].

Liberal educators assume that such problems can be resolved within the classroom walls, or even through dialogue with the community.

As we suggested earlier, we would argue that such a naive view of the world, by failing to understand the source of these problems, is unable to come to grips with finding any long-term solutions. Our own explanation attempts to link aspects of schooling (in this instance, writing) with the fundamental social structure, in this case, capitalism. To do so, we will utilise and adapt the Marxist concept of alienation.

For Marx alienation had three principal aspects - under capitalism man is alienated from nature, from his fellow human beings and from himself. Man produces objects in his work but these do not belong to him. They belong to the capitalist. The objects the worker produces come to dominate the life of the worker (one has only to think here of the car industry). Work instead of being a place where man confirms his creativity and humanity instead becomes a thing that has to be endured so that man can live:

> The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home. His labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labor. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labor is shunned like the plague. External labor, labor in which man alienates himself, is a labor of self-sacrifice, of mortification.[42]

We would argue that the alienation which permeates capitalism finds expression also in school writing. For example, if in the above quote we substitute the words "writer" for "worker" and "writing" for "work" and "labor" we have, we believe, an accurate philosophical description of most of the writing that takes place in school, and hence the beginnings of an explanation for why it is so unpopular. Consider, for example, the following quotation which is taken from Paul Willis' Learning to Labor.[43] Willis' book is a study into "how working class kids get

working class jobs". He studied 12 working class children in a variety of settings and in considerable depth. In this passage we have Fuzz's opinion of writing. For him it has indeed developed in Marxist words an "alien character".

> PW What's the last time you've done some writing?
> Will When we done some writing?
> Fuzz Oh ah, last time was in careers, 'cos I writ 'yes' on a piece of paper, that broke me heart.
> PW Why did it break your heart?
> Fuzz I mean to write, 'cos I was going to try and go through the term without writing anything. 'Cos since we've cum back, I ain't dun nothing (it was half way through term).[44]

Consider also the common case of a class of thirty or more pupils working from the same text book. They are an ensemble determined by the same inanimate text book. They each produce identical pieces of writing. Yet they never come together as a real community to create something. Each pupil remains isolated without any real concern for the other pupils. In Sartre's phrase they form a "plurality of isolations"[45] And should the teacher introduce marks and competition, the relationship between the pupils will deteriorate even further. The whole process of school writing thus inexorably deepens the alienation of the pupils.

We now need to unpack further the specific mechanisms of alienation - a crucial one being the just-mentioned role of assessment. For while teachers may not perceive assessment as the principle purpose of school writing, the fact remains that virtually all school writing is assessed. In order to grasp the implications of this, it is necessary to first briefly review the role of assessment in the school.

Assessment functions predominantly as a means of social control - ultimately by deciding who gets what jobs in society. This helps to explain why it is that, as jobs become scarcer, pressures for assessment increase.[46] Integral to the assessment process of course is the

relationship of domination and subordination referred to earlier in this paper. Thus, in relation to school writing, the teacher not only sets the topic (which may have no relationship whatsoever to the pupils' needs and ideas) but also judges the value of the writing Thus the writing does not belong to the pupil, the subordinate; it is taken over by the teacher and can be used against the pupil in a wide range of ways including, ultimately, as we suggested, to decide whether the writer gets a job or not. The writing, though produced by the self, is not owned by, or part of, the self. The assessment process is thus inherently alienating and, for most children, potentially dangerous, a weapon to be used against them. The pupil/writer is in a dilemma. The greater the involvement with the writing, the greater the pain in the alienation. The basic defence against this is not to care about the writing, to write very little. Hence the universal question, "How much do we have to write?"

The fact that there is so little continuous writing in schools can now be seen not as an accidental by-product of teacher ignorance, but because continuous writing is not necessary, even antithetical perhaps, to the assessment-dominated schooling processes which enslave both pupil and teacher in the hierarchical distribution of knowledge, control and power characteristic of our society. The solution to this then will not be found by preaching enlightenment teacher by teacher, school by school, as liberal educators assume, but in a radical transformation of the social, economic and political relationships of capitalism.

Does this then mean the teacher is helpless? How does the teacher break out of this situation and help overcome the alienation involved, for example, in school writing?

For Marx, alientation would begin to be abolished when the worker owned

the products he produced. The key to ending alienation was to end the ownership of the many by the few. In the context of school writing then, a beginning can be made by returning the ownership of the written product to the pupil in such a way as to allow pupils to determine their own needs and their own audience for their writing. Just such an approach is part of the Freinet method.

> In Freinet classes, children do not have to write essays or dictations; they write what and when they want - 'free texts'. They describe their experiences, their feelings, their dreams - what is important to them, not to the grown-ups. And why do they write? Because it is a means to an end - communication. The children print their texts on the little hand presses devised by Freinet, and produced by the Co-operative de l'Enseignement Laic (Co-operative for Lay Education). The texts are read by the class, discussed and published in the class newspaper, which is sold outside school to parents, neighbours and friends. Or they are sent to another school class: most Freinet classes correspond regularly with another class, usually in quite a different area. For instance, a class in a fishing village in Brittany might correspond with a class in Paris. The children have a thousand things to ask and tell each other: about their parents' work, the way they live, about differences between town and country. Through free texts, children learn to read and write correctly - the teacher and other children help in correcting a text before it is printed. In addition, the free texts have other important functions: the teacher learns a lot about his pupils, their problems, what they know and what they think. Pupils learn to express themselves and lose their fear of the written word. The 'free text', printing, the class newspaper and correspondence help to make the children the subject of their own education. They are the first steps on the way to creativity.[47]

The demands that pupils decide what is to be produced - that is, in this case, written - and that they own what is produced are of course revolutionary in that they cannot be encompassed within the existing power system. But we would contrast this with the demand from liberal educators that teachers should "reply" more often to children's writing. This demand is in effect merely a piecemeal attack on the alienation of school writing. It still leaves the writer in a powerless position.

We wish to make it clear here that we are not attacking the notion that teachers should "reply" rather than assess. That is a fine humanistic notion but by itself cannot solve the problem because it is treating

the symptom rather than the cause. The central task is not to make a harsh system more humane but to replace it with a basically humane system. In concrete terms, this might, for example, involve English teachers, as a body, vigorously and actively opposing attempts for increasing assessment in schools[48] rather than naively calling for less competition in the classroom.[49] This in turn of course requires that teachers, as a profession, recognise the class nature of the "community" with which they must deal, where there is no over-arching common interest. Thus teachers need to understand that it is the ruling groups in our society who initiate moves to tighten up assessment procedures - senior government representatives, big business interests and media barons[50] - and that these groups do not necessarily have most pupils' or teachers' best interests at heart. We would argue that only when we have achieved a society where people control their own lives, and for us that means a socialist society, will Freinet-type methods be allowed to play their full role.

There is also another avenue for teachers to explore and exploit. We have emphasised here the oppressive nature of school writing, if only because liberal educators so frequently underrate this dimension. There is however another side to it. Literacy is a two-edged sword - it can liberate or imprison. That writing can be a force for human emancipation can hardly be doubted. One is but to think of the restrictions on photocopying machines in Russia[51] or more vividly perhaps of the great Wall Poster campaign in China to see that writing can function against bondage. Again, in the context of our own society, the increasing attempts by right-wing groups to curtail and censor what is read, written and discussed in school[52] is indicative of the potentially liberalising - and threatening - force of genuine literacy.[53] Again, the solution to such attacks does not lie in the stealthy replacement

of banned books or furtive classroom discussion of controversial issues, valuable as such strategies may be. A more permanent solution requires that the teaching profession actively and collectively confronts such reactionary forces, involving concerned parents in the struggle. Most parents after all do in fact have their children's best interests at heart, and are seeking answers as to why they cannot find jobs now. At the moment they, and many teachers too, are being confused by attacks on education which attempt to make teachers responsible for unemployment. But again, if teachers are to effectively counter such attacks and start to unleash the liberating potential of schooling, they must first recognise their own position in the social structure. At present they are, we believe, being used by the dominant groups in our society as tools for oppression rather than, as they may fondly believe, educators of children.

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